

**FORESTRY COMMISSION ENGLAND
NINETIETH MEETING OF THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE
NATIONAL OFFICE BRISTOL
1 FEBRUARY 2018 AT 10.00hrs**

Minutes

Present:

Sir Harry Studholme (Chairman)
Mary Barkham
Ian Gambles
Julia Grant
Richard Greenhous
Simon Hodgson
Steve Meeks
Mark Pountain
Clive Tucker

Also present:

Jenny King – Item 7

Richard Barker - Secretary

1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting. Shirley Trundle had sent her apologies.

2. MINUTES OF THE MEETING ON 15 NOVEMBER 2017

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed as a true record.

3. MATTERS ARISING/UPDATES

Woodland Creation

The Chairman reported on the recent Ministerial Forestry Lunch which has seen a group of forestry and land management professionals and representatives of major landowners meet the forestry Minister to discuss the challenges of and barriers to woodland creation. It had been very helpful for the Minister to hear direct from practitioners, and the event would give extra impetus to officials' consideration of the issues raised. Overall it had been a very positive event and there was some optimism that it would, in the longer term, support additional woodland creation.

Plant Health

Richard Greenhous gave an update on the discovery of *P. ramorum* on Sitka spruce in Wales where it had been found to be sporulating. This has been on a tree under

considerable stress and was at a low level and scientific advice was broadly reassuring about the likelihood that *Phytophthora* posed a risk to sitka on a significant scale; nevertheless any such reports were of concern given the importance of Sitka spruce in the UK. More work was being undertaken to help understand the significance and nature of the finding.

It was reported that Action Oak was making good progress, gaining some momentum and support from a range of organisations. The challenge was to maintain the momentum in the fund raising efforts and the unified approach.

4. FINANCE REPORT

Paper 01/18

Steve Meeks provided additional background information on the approved and pending budget changes (Paragraphs 3 and 4). It was noted that the RDPE forecast had been reduced and Richard Greenhous provided some background information on this. It had been acknowledged that the previous forecasts had been optimistic and that these were not helped by information on likely expenditure only being available at a very late stage in the application processing. The money would be retained in the overall RDPE budget but would not necessarily be reallocated to woodland. The reluctance of landowners to engage in woodland creation was discussed and some suggestions were made on how support for forestry should be approached in the overall land management issues and incentives post Brexit.

Business Planning

Steve Meeks provided an update on planning process and pressures on the departmental wide budget. The Committee was concerned that a reduced baseline would have a long-term negative impact as would any loss of the protection for the funding of the Public Forest Estate. There was also concern that there were additional costs for the organisation due to the transformation and devolution costs, which would peak in 2018/19, but were expected to deliver longer term savings. It was agreed that change had to be adequately financed in order to ensure success. It was also noted that funding the forestry elements of the 25 year plan had not yet been decided and that this would be tied up with the decisions on support for farming and the countryside post Brexit.

Internal Audit

The improving situation was noted by the Committee.

5. FUTURE FORESTRY COMMISSION

Paper 02/18

Ian Gambles advised the Committee that, subject to any final comments, the Future Forestry Commission document would be published internally. The Executive Board would be giving further consideration to the Implementation Plan at its forthcoming meeting, and would welcome any comments from the Committee.

There was considerable discussion of the significance of the internal plans for the Forestry Commission with the wider Defra activities and the overall approach being taken to arm's length bodies. It was concluded that the best course of action was to

progress the agreed changes in the context of the Parliamentary Statement and 25 Year Environment plan with minimal disruption to the day to day business of the Forestry Commission. The Committee was content for the Future Forestry Commission document to be published and the implementation plan to be taken forward and further developed, with it being brought back to the Committee when necessary.

6. 25 YEAR ENVIRONMENT PLAN

Richard Greenhous gave a short presentation, emphasising the significance of the Plan for both the Government and the environment. This had been recognised through holding a Prime Ministerial launch.

The proposal for a new Northern Forest marked a significant change in approach to delivering woodland creation and the proposed public funding for this initiative had been taken from the Woodland Carbon Fund.

Identifying suitable areas for large scale woodland creation, and promoting Forestry Investment Zones to attract community, commercial and landowner investors, was a priority together with strengthening domestic carbon offset mechanisms to encourage more businesses to offset their emissions through planting trees. At the other end of the scale support for community forests would continue so that they could play a leading role in encouraging urban tree planting

Existing trees and woodland would be better protected with a Tree Health Resilience Plan due later in 2018 and work to place biosecurity at the centre of the supply chain for woodland creation. The work of Grown in Britain would continue and the public forest estate would remain in trust for the nation. The appointing of a national Tree Champion to promote trees and forests and encourage joined-up thinking on tree issues was still at an early stage.

In the follow up discussion it was recognised that the value for money of the approach taken to the Northern Forest would be an important element to be assessed. The effectiveness and role of the Community Forests was considered and whilst it was a variable picture they were recognised as leaders in community engagement and local delivery. It was also recognised that the future support mechanisms post CAP would be key to delivery of the forestry objectives in the plan. The potential role of the Tree Champion was also discussed and that this might be a catalyst for the creation of a new Forestry Strategy for England.

The next stage in the process would be the development of the implementation plan, which would tie in with the work that had been ongoing for some time in the lead up to the launch of the Plan.

(The Chairman left the meeting at this point for another appointment and Ian Gambles took over in the Chair)

7. CORPORATE PLAN

Paper 03/18

Jenny King joined the meeting and provided some additional information on the stages that plan would be going through before completion and clarified some minor

issues that were raised by Committee members. In response to questions around the presentation of cross border issues it was acknowledged that this presented some challenges, at least until 2019/20 which would be an opportunity to reassess how the Commission's future plans should be presented.

Members were asked to send any additional comments they may have direct to Jenny after the meeting.

8. CSEP

Paper 04/18

Steve Meeks introduced the item and emphasised the scale of the task that was being undertaken and the range of activities that were in scope. This was presenting big challenges for the organisation whilst it maintained its day to day business activities.

The Committee sought assurance on a number of issues, in particular the testing of IT systems before they went live and the provision and testing of disaster recovery. In response to these and other question it was explained that tests are taking place, for example the new payroll system will be run in a parallel test on three occasions and other testing will take place as data is migrated and systems built. Disaster recovery would be mainly dependent on the service providers rather than being reliant on Forestry Commissions own hardware and software, an arrangement which spread the risk and made the systems more resilient. The services had been taken from approved government suppliers and have disaster recovery and business continuity requirements included in the contracts. More details of these would be brought back to the Committee to help provide further reassurance.

9. FOREST HOLIDAYS and CAMPING IN THE FOREST

Paper 05/18

Simon Hodgson confirmed that successful refinancing of Forest Holidays and that business was continuing uninterrupted, with the same people running the business. The Framework Agreement was due to be considered later in the year when the new majority owners were expected to start to play a more hands on role. The site development programme had been resumed and bookings were now being taken for Beddgelert.

Camping in the Forest had a successful year with all the legacy debts having been cleared. The development of Sherwood had suffered a minor delay meaning that it would not be open for business until 2019. The complex negotiations were now underway to enable the infrastructure on sites in the New Forest to be refreshed and improved. This would be a long and difficult process, but essential in order to bring the sites up to modern standards and meet customer expectations.

10.AOB

Clive Tucker gave a brief update of the work planned by the National Tree Safety Group, with particular reference to Ash Dieback. The aim was for revised guidance on tree safety to be published by Spring 2019.